

Pakistan's government backs down under pressure from Washington and military

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Under intense pressure from Washington and the military, Pakistan's government backed away, early Monday morning, from a violent showdown with the principal opposition party, conceding one of its key demands and lifting a draconian ban on all political meetings and protests.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led coalition government had vowed that it would prevent Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League, other opposition parties, and lawyer's groups from marching on the capital, Islamabad, Monday and staging an indefinite sit-in outside the country's parliament building to press for the restoration to the judicial bench of the high and supreme court judges that the now defrocked military dictator general Pervez Musharraf purged in November 2007.

In an attempt to crush the protest movement, the government last week banned all political gatherings, threatened to charge protest leaders with sedition, mobilized police and para-military forces to break-up anti-government protests and ordered cable providers to cease transmission of GEO Television, a Pakistani-oriented broadcaster based in Dubai.

Then on Sunday, it placed Sharif and several other prominent government opponents under house arrest and blockaded roads into the capital using shipping containers. All of these measures were patterned after those that the dictator Musharraf had employed in 2007 in the face of mounting popular opposition.

But unlike then, sections of the military-security establishment in the Punjab balked.

Sharif quickly escaped from detention, with police reportedly joining in dismantling the barricades that they had erected round his house. Also escaping from house arrest was Aitzaz Ahsan, the lawyer and one-time PPP leader who has spearheaded the campaign to restore the purged judges to the bench.

Late Sunday afternoon, after several hours of battling with tens of thousands of protesters in Lahore, the capital of the Punjab and Pakistan's second largest city, police faded away, leaving the protesters in control of the city center. By then a significant number of prominent Lahore, Punjab, and even national officials responsible for law and order had resigned rather than implement the government's orders to suppress the protests. These included the Deputy Inspector General and the

Superintendent of Police for Lahore. In quitting his post as Pakistan's Deputy Attorney-General, Abdul Hai Gilani accused police of torturing protesters.

Addressing supporters in Lahore Sunday evening, Ahsan declared, "The writ of the government has ended. Nobody can stop us from reaching Islamabad."

At a meeting in the early hours of Monday morning, Pakistani Army Chief General Ashfaq Kayani bluntly told Pakistani President and PPP chairperson Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousaf Gilani that they must reverse course. According to the *Dawn*, "Highly placed sources said ... it was after [Kayani's] not-so-veiled warning that the two top civilian leaders agreed to roll back some of the controversial decisions of the previous and present governments, including the sacking of the chief justice of Pakistan."

In a brief address broadcast to the nation via television at 6 in the morning Monday, Gilani announced that Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry and the other purged judges will be restored to the bench by an executive order March 21. Earlier the government had said that it would petition the Supreme Court to review a much decried, and patently politically-manipulated February 25 decision that barred Sharif and his brother, Shahbaz, from standing in elections or holding public office. Zardari used the Supreme Court ruling to justify sacking the PML (N) provincial government in the Punjab and placing Pakistan's most populous province under "governor's rule."

Soon after Gilani's broadcast, Sharif announced that the protest planned for Islamabad later that day had been called off.

The US embassy welcomed Gilani's announcement, calling it a "statesmanlike decision to defuse a serious confrontation" and a "substantial step towards national reconciliation."

Washington had intervened forcefully and with increasing urgency in the preceding days to press the government and Sharif to back off from a confrontation. US Ambassador Anne Patterson, Richard Holbrooke, the US's special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton all spoke at length with Zardari and Sharif, while the Pentagon held less public consultations with Kayani and the Pakistani high command.

The US's foremost concern was that the political crisis would paralyze or even split the Pakistani government and state at a time when Washington has repeatedly publicly demanded that Islamabad play a pivotal role in salvaging the US occupation of Afghanistan, by dramatically intensifying its efforts to stamp out support for the anti-US insurgency in Pakistan's Pashtun-speaking borderlands. This demand has been supplemented by an ongoing campaign of US missile strikes inside Pakistan, mounted in flagrant violation of international law.

The Obama administration also feared that a showdown between the country's principal bourgeois parties, involving mass demonstrations and confrontations with the police, could provide an entry point for Pakistan's oppressed masses to voice their anger at a devastating economic crisis and wrenching IMF restructuring program.

With its intervention in Pakistan's most recent political crisis, the Obama administration appears to have made a definite shift in US policy toward Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) or PML (N).

The previous Bush administration took a dim view of Sharif because of his personal antipathy to Musharraf, the dictator whom it had anointed an "indispensable ally" in the "war on terror," and because of his ties to Islamic fundamentalist politicians, some of whom the US deemed too sympathetic to the Taliban.

A rightwing, industrialist, Sharif began his political career as a protégé of another US-backed dictator, the infamous General Zia-ul Haq. Under conditions where the US was working closely with the PPP, the PML (N)'s historic rival, Sharif criticized the US on occasion over the past two years for supporting authoritarian rule in Pakistan and violating Pakistan's national sovereignty. But he has always insisted that he stands ready to work with Washington and strongly supports the decades' long alliance between the Pentagon and the Pakistani military.

Holbrooke and Clinton apparently sought and obtained further assurances from Sharif in recent days that he will do the US's bidding. Sharif told the *New York Times* last week that "the impression in Washington that he was too close to radical Islamists was misconceived" and that he favors a "united front" against terrorism.

Support for the PPP-led government, which came to power only a year ago, has plummeted as result of its pursuit of right-wing policies similar to those of the Musharraf regime, above all slavish support for the US occupation of Afghanistan and IMF restructuring.

Meanwhile, the PPP has increasingly been riven with division. A section of the party supported the call for the restoration of the judges—a demand Zardari resisted for fear that Chaudhry might seek to overturn the deal under which Musharraf indemnified him and other top PPP leaders of any crimes they may have committed when in power in the 1990s in return for their support for his "re-election" as president in

October 2007.

An even greater source of friction within the PPP, has been resentment over the dynastic and autocratic leadership of Zardari, who in December 2007 succeeded his assassinated wife, Benazir Bhutto, as head of the PPP.

Prime Minister Gilani, it should be noted, sought to distance himself from Zardari throughout the crisis of the past two weeks, including criticizing the imposition of governor's rule on the Punjab.

The burgeoning popular opposition to Zardari and the PPP unquestionably buoyed Sharif in championing the call for the restoration of the purged judges and it has led Washington to draw the conclusion that it should mend fences with Sharif, in so far as he demonstrates his readiness to do its bidding in respect to the Afghan war.

The Pakistani military, meanwhile, saw the power struggle between the PPP and PML (N) as a means to flex its political muscles and once again demonstrate to its patrons in Washington that it is the best bulwark of US interests in Pakistan.

Large sections of the military establishment are deeply hostile to the PPP, because of its historic association with the toppling of military rule in 1969-70. PPP founder Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was hanged by General Zia in 1979 and the Punjabi-dominated military and bureaucracy repeatedly conspired with Sharif and his PML to unseat PPP governments in the 1990s.

Sharif and much of the Pakistani media are proclaiming the restoration of the judges an historic triumph for democracy. It is nothing of the sort.

Once again Washington and the military have manipulated Pakistan's political structure for their reactionary ends.

The judges, Chaudhry included, have a long record of providing a legal fig-leaf for the authoritarian and arbitrary actions of the military and, even more importantly, have served as the legal enforcers of Pakistan's grossly unequal capitalist social order.

That is why all manner of right-wing forces, including the Ex-Servicemen's Association of former ISI-head Hamid Gul and other reactionary generals, and the Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's largest Islamic fundamentalist party, were willing to campaign for their return to the bench.

If Sharif has focused his opposition to the PPP government on the judges issue, it is precisely because he has no fundamental disagreement with the PPP-led government's support for the Afghan war or its neo-liberal economic policies.



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